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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VOTER REGISTRATION BEGINS SLOWLY

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASADOR HOWARD F.JETER. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: Voter registration began in Abuja September 12 with little fanfare and not much of a turnout. Previously postponed in July and August, there was ample speculation the exercise would be cancelled once more because of INEC's unpreparedness and the injunction sought by unregistered political parties. However, the lawsuit was decided in INEC's favor, allowing registration to proceed. Poloff observed registration at three local centers. The centers had sufficient registration materials but only small numbers of people were queued to register. The centers were poorly identified and difficult to locate. On one level of analysis, that registration began at all is welcome news. Yet, judging by what we saw in Abuja, INEC was not fully prepared; a significant portion of the first day and perhaps of the next few days of this ten-day exercise will likely be devoted to concluding what should have been pre-September 12 preparations. While some of the signs are positive, this first day provided no clear indication whether INEC can pull off a credible registration exercise. End Summary.

2. (C) For ten days (September 12-21), voter registration is scheduled to take place in 120,000 centers throughout Nigeria. Centers are expected to register 50 people a day for the entire period. Most are open-air centers with no shelter. Poloff observed the voter registration process at three centers in Abuja. There were no signs identifying the centers to the general public. The sites could only be picked out by the small cluster of people gathered to register.

3. (C) The first center was inside a school compound; once on campus, it took three inquiries to locate the correct building. There were three registering officials and representatives of the PDP and ANPP present. At 1515, 24 people had been registered and the process was taking 15 minutes per applicant. Only three voters were waiting in line. Poloff noticed posters advertising the registration lying on the floor but none had been displayed around the neighborhood. The other centers visited had registered 45 and 112 people respectively. These two were easier to find, because they were outside, but they were likewise unmarked. A British High Commission (BHC) Poloff found two out of three centers visited closed due to rain, and the one that was open had relocated to a nearby shelter. As with one of the sites observed by Poloff, BHC Poloff found only two of the required three officials present.

4. (C) Although political party observers were mostly pleased with the process there were complaints from registrants that the centers were difficult to find. They groused that a list of registration centers was not available to the general public. The presiding officials appeared to be conscientious; however, inadequate infrastructure and equipment made it a very difficult process. Information was first recorded manually and then transferred to a computer readable form. Registrants were required to leave thumbprints and then the thumb was marked with indelible ink (to prevent multiple registrations). A temporary card was issued at the end of the process. (Note: INEC guidelines originally required that the temporary cards be laminated prior to issuance. Amended requirements deleted this step. Temporary cards looked flimsy and easily damaged. End note.)

5.(C) Poloff asked when permanent cards would be issued. The officials replied only that there would be

an announcement when the cards were ready.

6.(U) Efforts to promote voter registration varied across the country. Media coverage was sparse as talk of the presidential impeachment dominated the press. Only a few radio advertisements promoting registration were broadcast this week. In Kano and Plateau States September 12 and 13 were declared public holidays and turnout appeared to be above the rate required per polling sites. Turnout in Kaduna was reported as poor. The Governor of Katsina visited several centers to encourage participation in his state.

17. (C) Some governors reportedly threatened to withhold salaries from civil servants who do not register. (Note: Some of these states are already in arrears of salary payments. The threat, to some degree, is empty posturing for political purposes. However, many governors want to maximize the number of registered voters in their states. A larger pool of voters translates into more political clout and the potential for a larger share of federal funds down the road. End Note.) Osun, Ogun, Oyo, Edo and Bayelsa States issued threats that September wages would be paid upon presentation of a voter card. The Nasarawa State Governor purportedly told citizens that cards would be required for medical treatment and school admission. Governor Ahmed Mu'azu of Bauchi State ordered senior government officials to return to their places of origin in order to "aggressively mobilize citizens to register."

Comment

8.(C) The long awaited registration exercise was greeted with relief. Its start was uncertain as late as September 11. While our sampling of stations in Abuja was not scientific we believe it was sufficiently reflective of what happened in most of Northern Nigeria. It showed that registration has begun slowly and that INEC was not fully prepared. Nevertheless, it was encouraging that centers were open and that forms were available. The initial low turnout was expected; the turnout should rise over the weekend and accelerate as the ten days progress. Hopefully, information about the registration centers will be better disseminated and their locations better identified.

19. (C) Given that ten days is a minimally adequate time period to conduct registration in Nigeria, each day it appears the pace of registration has been slowed by INEC's lack of preparation lessens the possibility that the exercise will be viewed as successful by most Northern Nigerians. Many Northerners already suspect INEC of trying to minimize the numbers of voters registered in the North due to the strong opposition to President Obasanjo that comes from this region of the country.

JETER